

Task Force C Meeting Summary

Monday, September 8, 2008

Task Force Participants: Elaine Brown – MIFFS and MFPC, Donald Coe - Black Star Farms and MI Commission on Agriculture, David Conner – C.S. Mott Group for Sustainable Food Systems, Kathy Fedder – MI Department of Agriculture, Ben Kudwa – Michigan Potato Industry, Michigan Department of Corrections Representative, Kristin Misiak - Traverse City Public Schools and MFPC

Additional Participants: Sarah Schillio – Office of State Representative Lee Gonzales, Ted Beals, Peggy Beals

Task Force B: Promoting Michigan Foods convened on Monday, September 8, 2008 from 2:00-4:00pm in Constitution Hall in Lansing. Council member Elaine Brown chaired the meeting.

Ms. Brown called the meeting to order and initiated a brief round of introductions. Kirsten Simmons, executive coordinator of the Michigan Food Policy Council (MFPC), gave the group an overview of the two duties of each taskforce. Taskforce C will work to implement the recommendations outlined under this taskforce in the MFPC's 2006 Report of Recommendations and will be asked to address emerging food policy issues from time to time. Ms. Simmons also expressed to the group that there is particular interest in state government around urban agriculture, which can encompass many of the recommendations discussed under this taskforce.

The group was told that the purpose of this meeting was to begin to discuss and develop priorities in implementation of the recommendations to focus our efforts. Ms. Simmons asked the group to let her know if there were additional people that should be invited to the table.

Discussion moved to identifying additional accomplishments under each of the Taskforce C recommendations to add to a "working" document that the council has started.

Recommendation C1:

It was brought to the group's attention that there would be a hearing held by the House Agriculture Committee to vote on farm-to-school and Select Michigan legislation later in the week. These bills cover topics like institutionalizing Select Michigan, identifying a farm-to-school point-person in the Michigan Department of Agriculture, and raising the small purchase threshold for food purchases in schools.

The taskforce had a brief discussion of Select Michigan and the great value in letting consumers know that food was produced in Michigan. The group also expressed the importance of getting the message out to support Michigan producers. It was mentioned that there is a Select Michigan review underway. The taskforce members asked Ms. Simmons to ask about having a presentation to summarize its findings.

Recommendation C2:

One of the council members noted the buying local has become challenging due to higher food prices, even when transportation costs are rising. It was also mentioned that the federal reimbursement for food programs in schools does not cover the real cost of a meal and it is hard for districts to absorb the cost difference. Traverse City schools are in a co-op with 600 other schools and work through Cherry Capitol Foods to maximize purchasing power. It was mentioned that with the workload of most school food service directors, local food needs to be easy to obtain and perhaps joint invoices would help.

The taskforce also discussed the idea that schools can get some food through the Department of Defense and wondered whether this could be setting up a system where local farmers compete against the products that can be obtained from the federal government.

A taskforce member mentioned that we should be demanding the kind of food we want from large distributors and encourage people in food service leadership to do the same. The group asked that Ms. Simmons invite Sysco and Gordon Food Service to the table.

The taskforce questioned why buyers have not had more influence with large distributors. The group wondered if it was supply, volume, packaging needs versus reality of how items are packaged, appearance and size of the product, or some combination of these factors.

It was mentioned that some research shows that big distributors do buy Michigan products, but simply don't label them as such. There would need to be an effort to tell them that this is what people want. The group also discussed whether Michigan is really maximizing its purchasing power. It was suggested that we invite the regional purchasing consortiums to the table. One of the taskforce members mentioned that the Wallace Center is working with Sysco to incorporate more Michigan products.

The group agreed that Farm-to-School is a complex issue, but we need to keep working on a multi-faceted approach and bring groups together to discuss gaps and opportunities to move forward. The taskforce felt that it was the Michigan Food Policy Council's role to bring these stakeholders together for discussions. A taskforce member expressed the idea that parents and the community at-large really like to hear that schools are buying local when they can and supporting Michigan producers. They feel good about the food that is being served.

It was noted that Farm-to-School is also an opportunity for schools to incorporate nutrition education. The group noted that there could be additional opportunities here.

One of the taskforce participants encouraged the Food Policy Council as a whole to address new outlooks for the world's food supply and price.

Recommendation C3:

The group discussed how pleased it was about the Michigan potato contract with the Michigan Department of Corrections and its role in opening up new opportunities. It was explained that the Michigan Department of Corrections would be reorganizing its purchasing process to increase efficiency. There will be 3 regions, each with its own contact information. The department is also looking to maximize storage areas. One of the taskforce members asked if the new structure will change the way spot buys are conducted. The department representative stated that it should not change this process.

The group was notified that the Michigan Potato Industry Commission is working with the Department of Corrections on a pilot program in Jackson, MI. They hope to even surpass the savings created in the first pilot in Newberry, MI. The Food Policy Council was encouraged to continue assistance in initiating similar pilot projects at institutions across the state.

The representative from the Michigan Department of Corrections stated that they have been able to increase the amount of local products they purchase. The importance of having products that are easy to serve and uniform in size was stressed to the group. The department also held a series of workshops on state procurement. A taskforce member asked if the department had met the recommendation set forth by the Food Policy Council that they increase local product purchases by 5% per year. The representative from the Michigan Department of Corrections said she would get that information for the next taskforce meeting.

The group also discussed the possibility of connecting institutional buyers with producers more often on MarketMaker, a searchable website offered by the MSU Product Center.

Recommendation C4:

The taskforce discussed that there is now a farmers market support program in the form of the Michigan Farmers Market Association (MIFMA). The group also discussed the increasing number of markets around the state. MIFMA offered a market manager bootcamp during the Expo and Ag Week, which had great attendance.

One of the taskforce members opened up discussion on how the taskforce and the State Of Michigan can help entrepreneurs with regulations and farmers markets. A participant suggested that there be assistance in ways to sell more perishable foods. A

taskforce member brought up the idea that some markets don't allow the sale of meat in their bylaws. The group discussed whether training could be done to encourage more full-service markets, which could be helpful in neighborhoods without grocery stores.

Increased weights and measures inspections were suggested by a few taskforce participants, but they also recognized staffing levels and the increased focus on gas inspections at this time.

It was brought to the taskforce's attention that the Michigan Department of Agriculture's Food and Dairy Division is meeting once per year with MIFMA to talk through any emerging farmers market issues. They look forward to continuing those meetings.

The taskforce discussed how food laws could impact small operations versus medium-large scale operations. It was mentioned that one of the Food and Dairy staff is working with others on a national model for smaller businesses. They are aiming for something that recognizes the resources of a small operator, while ensuring safety. It was noted that this is a complex issue and will take time to accomplish.

Closing/Next Steps

There was no public comment made by the guests in attendance.

Between this meeting and the next meeting of Taskforce C, Ms. Simmons said that she will consolidate the ideas expressed in the meeting and send out a draft of possible priorities for consideration and comment. The goal is to finalize priority areas for Taskforce C as it moves forward with implementation of the recommendations.